

MODULE 5

20 Rules of Plain English

Now that you've mastered the basics of plain English, you'll want to learn more of the rules. This module covers 20 of the most important rules to remember as you write. These are the rules that most writing styleguides agree on.

Of course, rules are meant to be broken, and these are no exception. The rules are meant to provide you with useful guidelines to help you make writing decisions—not to be followed slavishly.

20 key rules:

- write in parallel ways
- keep related words together
- use prepositions with care
- distinguish “which” from “that”
- avoid surplus nouns
- avoid noun and modifier strings
- use pronouns with care
- avoid slang
- be gender neutral
- be specific
- avoid clichés
- place modifiers carefully
- avoid unnecessary qualification
- use contractions
- be concise
- avoid foreign words
- capitalize properly
- abbreviate with care
- write numbers consistently
- ignore some old rules

Write in parallel ways

Parallelism means being consistent in how you structure your writing. Once you establish a pattern, use it. Parallelism makes reading faster and easier.

Keep items in a list parallel. Each item should be constructed in a similar way and start with the same kind of word, such as a noun or verb. If one item is a whole sentence, they all should be.

Examples: Parallel sentences

Originally, writing was taught by analysis, while now a synthesis approach is used. (**Not parallel**)

Originally, writing was taught by analysis; now it is taught by synthesis. (**Parallel**)

The evaluation report was written outlining the case study and with a list of contributors. (**Not parallel**)

The evaluation report was written outlining the case study and listing the contributors. (**Parallel**)

Example: Not parallel list

Students must bring the following items:

- styleguide
- bring pencils and pens
- You should bring a word processor.

Example: Parallel list

Students must bring the following items:

- styleguide
- pencils and pens
- word processor

Exercise 17: Make the last three items parallel to the first

The plan is deficient because:

- the budget was not prepared
- Two major cost items were not identified.

-
- staffing not approved

-
- other errors
-

Keep related words together

Keep related words together—otherwise confusion and ambiguity may result.

Examples

She noticed a cigarette burn on the desk that was right in the centre.

(No, right in the centre of what?)

She noticed a cigarette burn on the centre of the desk. **(Yes)**

He wrote three pages on how to use the computer for the user manual.

(No, not just for the computer manual)

He wrote three pages for the user manual on how to use the computer. **(Yes)**

Try one

The president said she hoped all employees would give generously to the charity at a staff meeting today.

Use prepositions with care

Prepositions are words that connect or relate nouns and pronouns to other words. They can relate things spatially, in time, or figuratively.

Some common prepositions:

- about
- at
- beneath
- by
- of
- on
- through
- to
- with
- according to
- across
- down
- for
- into
- next to
- on top of
- over
- up

For years, many students were told not to end sentences with prepositions (a *dangling* preposition). This is a rule that you should ignore. English has always had sentences that end with prepositions.

Examples

That's a behaviour we can't put up with.

That's an area we don't want to get into.

He's the consultant you spoke about.

This is the styleguide they referred to.

Winston Churchill was once corrected by a senior army officer for ending a sentence with a preposition. His reply

was, "That is the sort of English up with which I will not put." His reply pokes fun at the awkward sentences that often result if you try to avoid ending a sentence with a preposition.

Examples of bad fixes

That's an area into which we don't want to get.

He's the consultant about whom you spoke.

This is the styleguide about which they referred.

If your sentences sometimes sound like these, are you avoiding placing a preposition at the end? Many writers do, but don't realize that's what they're doing.

Omit prepositions if you can without changing the meaning. In the following examples, the underlined prepositions are unnecessary and can be omitted.

Examples

All of the managers went to the meeting.

We moved the files off of the server.

The study area is too near to the cafeteria.

We began at about 9:00 a.m.

Distinguish “which” from “that”

Use “which” to introduce non-restrictive clauses—clauses that don’t narrow or *restrict* the meaning. Such clauses could be put into parentheses or removed entirely without altering the essential meaning of the sentence.

Use “that” for restrictive clauses—clauses that narrow or restrict the meaning. Such clauses are always integral to the sentence, and could not be put into parentheses or removed entirely without altering the essential meaning of the sentence.

“Which” and “that” are punctuated differently. Because “which” introduces a clause that could be placed in

parentheses, it is preceded with a comma. But because “that” introduces a clause that’s integral to the sentence and could not be placed in parentheses, it is not preceded with a comma.

Example

We rejected the last proposal, which was sent by fax. (**The rejected proposal happens to have been faxed**)

We rejected the last proposal that was sent by fax. (**But not necessarily the last proposal**)

Exercise 18: “Which” and “that”

Review each sentence and decide if “which” and “that” are used correctly:

The manager plans to take us to the new Thai restaurant that is in our old office building.

Penticton, which lies within the Okanagan Valley, is shown on the attached map.

The proposal, which we liked best, was from Acme Printing and Binding.

The Committee reviewed the best plans that were submitted.

We could not find the digital file, which was missing.

Avoid surplus nouns

Avoid nouns that don't add meaning or precision. Watch out for:

- approach
- area
- concept
- condition
- location
- environment
- situation
- type

Example

They were interested in the decentralized decision-making concept. **(No)**

They were interested in decentralized decision making. **(Yes)**

Try one

The meeting was delayed by the courier shortage situation.

Avoid noun and modifier strings

Avoid stringing nouns or modifiers together. Even two-word strings can be taken in several ways. How many different meanings can you think of for “management option”?

Instead, unstack strings to make the meaning clear. Before you use strings, ask yourself if all your readers will know what you're talking about.

Instead of...	Write...
component reference designators	designators for referring to components
marketing plan analysis	analysis of the marketing plan
long-range failure prevention program	long-range program for preventing failures
typical user interface problem area	areas where users typically have problems

Exercise 19: Rewrite the following noun and modifier strings so their meaning is clear

problem responsibility changes

ad hoc report generation utility

obsolete cardholder file

operator-induced failure-rate increase problem

non-literate personnel manager

Use pronouns with care

A *pronoun* is a word that represents a noun. The noun that it refers back to is its *antecedent*. Here are some common pronouns:

- I
- you
- he
- she
- they
- which
- them
- their
- it
- this
- that
- one

Pronouns force readers to remember the antecedent. In some cases, the antecedent may not be clear.

Example

The manager's expense reports were incomplete and were beyond the per diem rates set out in the Superintendent's policy guidelines. This prevented them from being processed. (**Antecedents not clear**)

The manager's expense reports were incomplete and were beyond the per diem rates set out in the Superintendent's policy guidelines. The lack of completion prevented the reports from being processed. (**Clear**)

Personal pronouns

Don't be afraid to use personal pronouns, particularly "I," "we," and "you." They give your writing a natural human quality. See *Person*, page 115).

Some writers get confused between subjective and objective cases of pronouns.

Example

I gave him the file, but he gave me nothing. (**Okay**)

Bob and me went over the figures together (**No, "Bob and I"**)

The above example is confusing because of the compound subject "Bob and me." In this case, you can check the pronoun "me" by temporarily omitting "Bob."

List of personal pronouns

			Subjective	Objective	Possessive
First person	Singular		I	me	my/mine
	Plural		we	us	our/ours
Second person	Singular		you	you	your/yours
	Plural		you	you	your/yours
Third person	Singular	Masculine	he	him	his
		Feminine	she	her	hers
		Neutral	it	it	its
	Plural		they	them	theirs/theirs

Avoid slang

Avoid slang (also known as *colloquialisms*)—words, or uses of accepted words, that are not generally considered proper. Many commonly accepted words began as slang, but have come into general use. When you decide that a word is acceptable will depend on how liberal or conservative you are with the language, and how formal your document is.

Examples of slang

It was cutting-edge technology.

Cursor over to the right of the screen.

His presentation was totally radical.

Hey, dude, look at these figures!

Some writers will use slang, but place it in single quotes. Here's what Strunk and White, authors of *The Elements of Style*, have to say about this practice:

If you use a colloquialism, or a slang word or phrase, simply use it; do not draw attention to it by enclosing it in quotation marks. To do so is to put on airs, as though you were inviting the reader to join you in a select society of those who know better.



New words to consider:

AQUADEXTROUS (ak wa deks' trus) adj. Possessing the ability to turn a faucet on and off with your toes.

CARPERPETUATION (kar' pur pet u a shun) n. The act, when vacuuming, of running over a string or a piece of lint at least a dozen times, reaching over and picking it up, examining it, then putting it back down to give the vacuum one more chance.

DISCONFECT (dis kon fekt') v. To sterilize a piece of candy you dropped on the floor by blowing on it, assuming this will somehow remove all the germs.

ELBONICS (el bon' iks) n. The actions of two people manoeuvring for one armrest in a movie theatre.

FRUST (frust) n. The small line of debris that refuses to be swept onto the dust pan and keeps backing a person across the room until he or she finally decides to give up and sweep it under the rug.

LACTOMANGULATION (lak' toe man gyu lay' shun) n. Manhandling the "open here" spout on a milk container so badly that one has to resort to the illegal side.

PEPPIER (pehp ee ay') n. The waiter at a fancy restaurant whose sole purpose seems to be walking around asking diners if they want ground pepper.

Be gender neutral

Don't make assumptions about gender. If you're talking about all managers, don't use "he" or "she" or "his" or "hers" unless you know that it will always be one gender or the other.

Avoid gender-specific nouns. Many new gender-neutral nouns have entered the language in the last few decades. Here are just a few:

Gender specific	Gender neutral
chairman	chair or chairperson
fisherman	fisher
actress	actor
fireman	firefighter
waitress	server
delegates and their wives	delegates and their spouses
workman	worker

Many writers run into trouble with personal pronouns because English does not have singular gender-neutral personal pronouns. "He," "his," "she," and "hers" are all gender specific. Pronouns such as "they," "their," and "them," while neutral, must refer back to plural antecedents.

Example

The manager (antecedent) must submit his (pronoun) budget to head office. (**Gender specific**)

The managers must submit their reports to head office. (**Gender neutral**)

The manager must submit the report to head office. (**Pronoun omitted**)

Use these tactics to avoid gender-specific pronouns, or worse, awkward constructions like "he/she."

- Repeat the noun (despite what your English teacher may have said, don't worry about using the same word over again).
- If appropriate, make the antecedent plural so you can use "they," "them," or "their" (for example, talk about "clerks" instead of "the clerk").
- Drop the pronoun entirely, or re-cast the sentence so that a pronoun is not necessary.

Be specific

Avoid abstract or inexact terms. In business, your readers are looking for solid, descriptive information—facts, figures, and directions.

Exercise 20: Revise these sentences to replace the general and the inexact with the exact and the concrete

Mud the gyproc with a thin layer of filler, then wait for awhile before sanding.

To ensure that the deadline can be met, the draft must be finished quickly.

Some staff experienced computer problems.

Turn the bolt until it's quite tight.

Avoid unnecessary expenditures.

Be aware of suspicious transactions.

Avoid clichés

Clichés are time-worn phrases that have lost their original freshness, and can usually be replaced with one or two simple words.

Many of the more colourful clichés, such as “let’s not beat around the bush,” have lost their original literal meaning. While readers know this cliché means “let’s get to it,” most could not explain the significance of the “bush” or the act of “beating.”

Exercise 21: Replace the following clichés with everyday words

please feel free to call	_____
between a rock and hard place	_____
in connection with	_____
with regard to	_____
six of one, half a dozen of the other	_____
with respect to	_____
easier said than done	_____
as already stated	_____
pursuant to your letter	_____
all things considered	_____
enclosed herewith is	_____
to say the least	_____
to explore every avenue	_____
in the neighbourhood of	_____
to a certain extent	_____
as a matter of fact	_____
suffice it to say	_____
hit the nail on the head	_____
the fact of the matter is	_____
we beg to acknowledge	_____
avoid clichés like the plague	_____

Place modifiers carefully

Watch where you place modifiers, such as “only,” “almost,” “already,” “even,” “just,” “nearly,” “merely,” and “always.”

Consider how the placement of one of these small words can alter the meaning of the sentence.

Example

The company wants to negotiate the union’s offer.

Only the company wants to negotiate the union’s offer.

The company wants only to negotiate the union’s offer.

The company wants to negotiate only the union’s offer.

The company wants to negotiate the union’s only offer.

The company wants to negotiate the union’s offer only.

Examples

They just wanted a time extension. **(No)**

They wanted just a time extension. **(Better)**

They almost spent five days writing the report. **(No)**

They spent almost five days writing the report. **(Yes)**

Try one

The annual report only provides year-end figures.



From Monday’s classified ads:

FORE SALE - R.D. Jones has one sewing machine for sale. Phone 555-0707 after 7 p.m. and ask for Mrs. Kelly who lives with him cheap

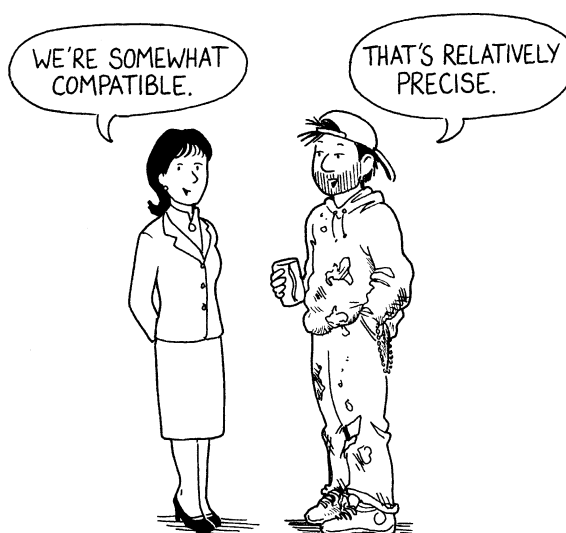
From Tuesday’s classified ads:

NOTICE - We regret having erred in R.D. Jone’s ad yesterday. It should have read: One sewing machine for sale. Cheap: Call 555-0707 and ask for Mrs. Kelly who lives with him after 7 p.m

Avoid unnecessary qualification

Don't qualify words that don't need to be qualified:

- totally committed
- completely devoted
- utterly rejected
- perfectly clear
- entirely finished
- quite precise
- radically new
- totally compatible
- somewhat unique
- relatively precise
- partially committed



Use contractions

Contractions are words formed by joining two words together and dropping some letters. Use contractions to give your writing an informal, conversational tone. Without them, your writing will sound formal and maybe a bit stilted.

You may want to avoid using contractions in formal documents, such as legal contracts or annual reports, or where you want to emphasize the words. For example, "You *will* go to the doctor!"

Common contractions	
can't	cannot
don't	do not
I'd	I would
I'll	I will
I'm	I am
it'll	it will
it's	it is
she'd/he'd	she would/he would
she'll/he'll	she will/he will
she's/he's	she is/he is
there's	there is
they'll	they will
they're	they are
we're	we are
won't	will not
you'll	you will
you're	you are

Be concise

Remove all unnecessary words to keep your writing as short as possible. You may find that your first draft contains unnecessary wording or redundant expressions. Take the time to weed out these space wasters. Your readers will thank you.

Ways to reduce words:

- understand what your readers need
- stick to essential information and skip the marginal details
- use active verbs
- use everyday words
- avoid redundant expressions, such as “abundantly clear”
- avoid clichés, such as “in the neighbourhood of”

Ways not to eliminate words or to make it look like fewer words:

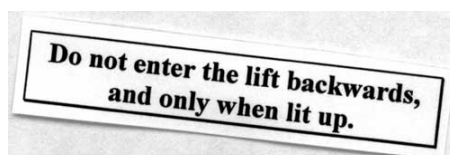
- drop articles and verbs (see *Abbreviated scientific style*, page 7)
- use acronyms instead
- make the type smaller than 10 points
- reduce line spacing or widen the text column

The chances of someone reading your writing are inversely proportional to its size.

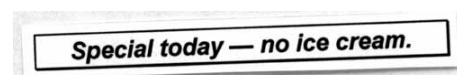


Signs and Notices From Around the World:

Leipzig Elevator



Swiss Inn



Avoid foreign words

Avoid foreign words in your writing, unless they have come into common use or there's no substitute.

Exercise 22: What do these foreign words and phrases mean?

pro bono	_____
gratis	_____
ipso facto	_____
c'est la vie	_____
tout fini	_____
savoir faire	_____
je ne sais quoi	_____

Avoid Latin abbreviations. Most of your readers won't know the words that these terms abbreviate. In particular, many people confuse "e.g." and "i.e."

Exercise 23: What Latin words do these abbreviations stand for?

e.g.	_____
i.e.	_____
etc.	_____

Spell them out in full:

Abbreviation	English equivalent
e.g.	"for example" or "for instance"
i.e.	"that is" or "that is to say"
etc.	"and so on" or introduce the list with "such as"

Avoid Roman numerals—many of your readers will get confused.

Exercise 24: Translate these numbers

IX	_____
M	_____
CM	_____
XC	_____
MCMXCIX	_____
MM	_____

Capitalize properly

Capitalize proper nouns only—names of people, objects, and entities. Don't capitalize a word because you think it's important or you want it to stand out. Capitalization helps readers distinguish the names of things from the descriptions of things.

Some capitalization varies depending on local practice. For example, some organizations usually capitalize the following words:

- Board
- Act
- Corporation
- Company

Exercise 25: List 10 types of things that should be capitalized

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____
10. _____

Exercise 26: Should these be capitalized?

Review the following and decide if they're capitalized correctly:

- Audit Of Financial And Management Practices (title of report)
- Kootenay regional district
- the Regional District (referring to above)
- district management staff
- the transportation of dangerous goods act
- the Act (referring to above)
- lower mainland
- greater Vancouver
- Northwestern British Columbia
- we audited three Ministries
- the insurance corporation of British Columbia
- the Corporation (referring to ICBC)
- the Board heard three submissions
- the Manager, Human Resources
- the manager of human resources

Abbreviate with care

Abbreviations, acronyms, and initialisms, referred to here simply as “abbreviations,” are just code to those who don’t know them, so use them with care. While they may make for quick communications among those in the know, they’re a problem particularly for newcomers and novices.

Example

The ADM cc’d the Mgr. ISD on the email to the dept. reps re: the LCDs, and attached the SOP on PDFing POs (Form 223). (**Avoid—spell them out**)

Tips on using abbreviations:

- use as few as possible, and only when readers will understand them
 - never coin any of your own
 - avoid abbreviations of foreign words, such as “i.e.,” “e.g.,” and “etc.”—use the English equivalents
 - spell them out the first time you use them
- form the plural by simply adding an “s”—don’t use an apostrophe unless it would be confusing (for example, “CRTs” but “GI’s”)
 - generally, drop periods unless it would be confusing, or it’s accepted practice (“BC,” “IBM,” “COD,” “ft”)
 - always use periods for “Mr.,” “Mrs.,” “Ltd.,” “Co.,” and “Dr.”—it’s accepted practice

Did you know?

Though the term “abbreviations” is used here to cover abbreviations, acronyms, and initialisms, the following are definitions of each.

Abbreviation – a shortened form of a word, such as “ft.”

Acronym – composed of the initial letters or parts of a compound term that is usually read as a single word, rather than letter by letter, such as “scuba” (self-contained underwater breathing apparatus).

Initialism – composed of the initial letters or parts of a compound term, but usually read letter by letter, rather than as a single word, such as “rpm” (revolutions per minute).

Write numbers consistently

Guidelines for using numbers in text:

- spell out numbers from one through nine
- use figures for 10 and greater, except numbers rounded to millions (for example, “10 million”)
- if one number in a sentence is 10 or greater, then use figures for all numbers (for example, “4 apples, 5 oranges, and 12 pears”)—except for “one,” which is always spelled out
- always spell out a number used at the beginning of a sentence
- form plurals of numbers by adding “s” (for example, “747s”)

Ignore some old rules

Here are some of the rules of English usage that you can safely ignore in business writing:

- don’t use personal pronouns, such as “I,” “we,” or “you,” except in informal documents (see *Writing points of view*, page 39, and *Use pronouns with care*, page 62)
- don’t use simple, everyday words—use your thesaurus and find an impressive one! (see *Word choice*, page 44)
- don’t use contractions (see *Use contractions*, page 68)
- avoid dangling prepositions (see *Use prepositions with care*, page 58)
- vary sentence structure to maintain reader interest (see *Active and passive verbs*, page 50)
- vary sentence length (see *Sentence length*, page 42)
- vary choice of words—never use the same word more than once or twice on the same page (see *Word choice*, page 44)
- never start a sentence with a conjunction, such as “because” or “and”



Why English is a crazy language

Let's face it—English is a crazy language:

- There is no egg in eggplant, nor ham in hamburger.
- There is neither apple nor pine in pineapple.
- English muffins weren't invented in England, nor French fries in France.
- Sweetmeats are candies, while sweetbreads, which aren't sweet, are meat.
- We take English for granted. But if we explore its paradoxes, we find that quicksand can work slowly.
- Boxing rings are square.
- A guinea pig is neither from Guinea, nor is it a pig.
- Why is it that writers write but fingers don't fing, grocers don't groce, and hammers don't ham?
- If the plural of tooth is teeth, why isn't the plural of booth beeth?
- One goose, two geese. So one moose, two meese? One index, two indices?
- Doesn't it seem crazy that you can make amends but not one amend? You can have noses that run and feet that smell?
- If you have a bunch of odds and ends and get rid of all but one of them, what do you call it?
- If teachers taught, why didn't preachers praught?
- If a vegetarian eats vegetables, what does a humanitarian eat?
- Sometimes I think all the English speakers should be committed to an asylum for the verbally insane.
- In what language do people recite at a play and play at a recital?
- How can a slim chance and a fat chance be the same, while a wise man and a wise guy are opposites?
- You have to marvel at the unique lunacy of a language in which your house can burn up as it burns down, you fill in a form by filling it out, and an alarm goes off by going on.
- English was invented by people, not computers, and it reflects the creativity of the human race, which, of course, is not a race at all.
- That is why when the stars are out, they are visible, but when the lights are out, they are invisible.